

The Washrooms of Power

Those Anonymous Propaganda Peddlers

by Murray Kempton

Sen. J. William Fulbright has covered two years now investigating the contribution to our foreign relations made by the lobbyists and public relations men that foreign governments hire to stand in the corridors of power and importune each passerby on his way to the washroom. These are respectable men and are treated as such by a Senator habituated to treat almost every man as though he were respectable. They enter closed hearing rooms and emerge to be seen later at places like the National Capital Democratic Club with the intact manner of persons whose shame has been kept private, as any shame should be. Every two weeks or so, Fulbright releases another volume of their testimony.

Let us begin with the oldest hand, Hamilton Wright Sr., who has been in public relations since 1906. Mr. Wright and his son do not sell advertising; they sell access to news and editorial pages and to information time offered by the radio and TV networks. In 1957 the government of Nationalist China hired the Wrights for \$300,000 a year to tell the American people what Mr. Wright Sr. was moved at the moment of sale to call "the amazing story of free China." The Wrights promised that, for their \$300,000, they would guarantee the Chinese Nationalists \$2.5 million worth of free publicity in the Free World's agencies of public information. They kept that promise in a fashion exemplary enough to illustrate the first lesson from Fulbright's hearings: *Public information in the United States has two branches - the editorial which is almost given away and the commercial which is sold.* Their worth can be compared this way: you can buy the space labeled "information" for a fraction of the price you have to pay for the same space labeled "advertising."

"This means," says a witness, "that if a picture appears in *The New York Times*, two columns wide, the credit would amount to only \$75. Actual cost to buy the space at regular advertising display rates would cost \$885." A one-minute news broadcast on a radio network is \$3,000; and 10 minutes of public service television is \$35,000. Still the consignment of the *Times* to the democratic slum of line value of a few cents for newspaper publicity is realistic and even generous, because the *Times* is ordinarily untouchable by the hand

of Wright; he is estimating the value of publicity in the thousand other papers that are susceptible to his touch because they are ready to print and sell as information anything they don't have to pay for. This illustrates a second lesson from the Fulbright hearings: *Public information in the United States, as a developed private enterprise, has become an industry which spends to distribute and cannot afford to spend to produce.*

One solution, the humblest, to the need of the communicator to offer the illusion that he is communicating is US Press, Inc. - of McLean, Va. - "the Well-spring of Washington Exclusive, Editorial Commentary for Grassroots Editors" - which ships editorials out free to 1,500 small dailies and weeklies. "Reliable editorial commentary on national news is the basic job of Washington Exclusive," US Press explains. "This regular comprehensive news service is made possible by responsible American business institutions who pay an established fee to present timely business stories of free enterprise to grassroots Americans." US Press charges its American business institutions \$175 for each editorial it distributes. One such client was Selvage and Lee, a publicity agent for the Portuguese, who composed an attack on the United States Government's position in the United Nations debate on Angola and paid US Press \$175 to send it free to its list of editors. The gift, according to the custom of US Press, went off unlabeled as to source. Robert Taylor, US Press's president, sold the same service for an editorial - *Trujillo's First Era* - prepared by the Dominican Information Service in 1957.

"Conservative sentiment - the spark of freedom cherished by hundreds of unreconstructed country editors" is the jewel US Press offers its business clients. Robert Taylor told the Fulbright committee that since he cherishes that spark, he has his standards; he will take from Salazar's press agent as from Trujillo's but he will not take from Adoula's.

Thus are grassroots withered; like minor league ball teams, they exist on subsidy from the majors. In journalism, they are farms for the public relations agencies. Kenneth Downs, a Selvage and Lee vice president, noted in his October, 1962 report on service to Portu-